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Revealed: Who sends harmful digital communications – and why

A ground-breaking study from Netsafe uncovers a range of reasons harmful digital communications are sent.

The amount of thought that goes into pressing send on a text or email is under the spotlight.

New Zealand's online safety organisation Netsafe surveyed adults to determine if they've sent harmful digital communications in the last year, and the reasons behind their actions.

With 18 percent of adults reporting they had received harmful digital communications, this new study sought to understand who is creating the content, and why it was happening.

The research found 11 percent of adults admitted sending or sharing at least one type of potentially harmful digital communication – and nearly 80 percent had done this more than once.

Netsafe's results are being released to coincide with Safer Internet Day, a global awareness campaign involving more than 170 countries, to promote a more positive time online.

Netsafe is Aotearoa's official host and celebrating a record number of supporters joining together.

Topping the list of reasons for sending a harmful digital communication was "for a joke" (28 percent), "to influence behaviour or thoughts" (14 percent), "to scare" (8 percent) and "to embarrass" (6 percent).

Six percent of respondents admitted to saying offensive things about someone else, and three percent tried to embarrass another person, attempted to exclude someone from a friendship group or made a sexual advance they were not sure was welcome.

"Netsafe can help people who have been the recipient of deliberate abuse and also assist people who didn't intend to hurt others," Martin Cocker, CEO, says. "It is important to see deliberate offenders prosecuted, but also to provide ways people can reverse harm that they may have accidentally caused."

Of those who sent harmful digital communications, 29 percent were friends of the recipient and 20 percent were family members. The main way to harm someone is predominantly via text (39 percent) followed by social media (34 percent) and email (20 percent).

Cocker said it did not matter how someone harmed another person online; stopping the behaviour and reducing distress was always Netsafe's main objective.

Last financial year, Netsafe received 22,705 reports and nearly 3,400 under the Harmful Digital Communications Act. Females comprised 52.4 percent of Netsafe's incoming reports. Almost 15,000 scam reports totalling \$19 million were received – the most common related to product and services fraud.

Netsafe is available seven days a week to provide free, confidential and non-judgemental support to those experiencing online harm – or for people who had been sending material likely to upset or affect others that were looking to make amends.

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About the study

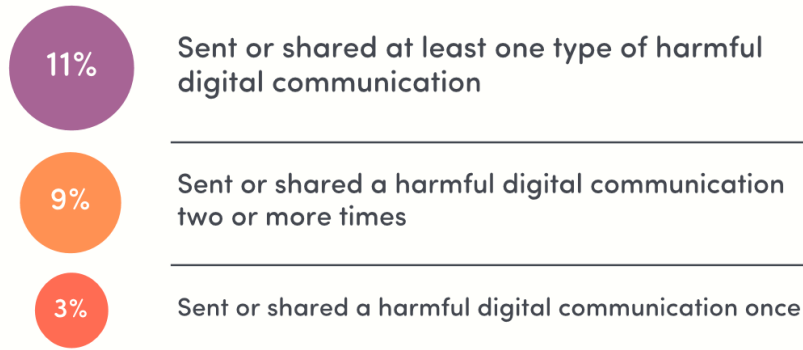
Typically research into harmful digital communications focuses on the victims. However, to better understand the distress and harm caused, information is needed about the people sending and sharing potentially harmful content.

In this study, Netsafe asked 1161 adults whether they had sent potentially harmful digital communications in the previous year and if so, how often they had done this, who they were sent to, the channel(s) they used, and the reason. A total of 1,150 people participated in the study and represented the population in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, religion and region.

More information is available at netsafe.org.nz/sending-sharing-potentially-HDC-2020.

Around 1 in 10 New Zealand adults send or share potentially harmful digital communications

Percentage of NZ adults who said they had sent or shared potentially harmful digital communications in the last 12 months.



Base: All participants (n=1,161)

The most frequently given reason for sending a potentially harmful digital communication was 'for a joke'

Prevalence of the different reasons New Zealand adults gave for sending or sharing potentially harmful digital communications

For a joke	28%
To influence their behaviour or thoughts	14%
To scare them	8%
To embarrass the person	6%
To get revenge or get back at them	4%
To get money from them	3%
To get more images or videos from them	2%
For sexual pleasure	1%
Other	19%
Don't know	16%

Base: Participants who sent at least one harmful digital communication (n=133)

About Safer Internet Day

Safer Internet Day has been celebrated since 2004 and is now celebrated in over 170 countries worldwide. As the host for New Zealand, Netsafe provides resources and tools to assist organisations, schools, and families to promote online safety and digital citizenship.

New Zealand is celebrating a record number of support partners for Safer Internet Day in 2021 making it the most significant Safer Internet Day yet.

A significant number of corporates, government agencies, kura and not-for-profit agencies have registered to spend February 9 celebrating the occasion and using it to educate their staff, students and members about how to stay safe online. Supporters include Microsoft, Netflix, Genesis Energy, Rainbow Youth, N4L, Age Concern, BNZ and Westpac have all joined forces for a better internet.

About Netsafe

Netsafe is an independent non-profit organisation with an unrelenting focus on online safety. We keep people of all ages safe online by providing free support, advice and education. Visit netsafe.org.nz for useful resources or call 0508 638 723 seven days a week for help with an online incident